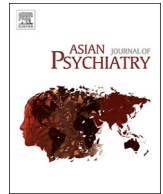




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Letter to the Editor

“Is compulsive social media use amid COVID-19 pandemic addictive behavior or coping mechanism?”

Dear Sir,

Owing to easy accessibility of internet, globally there are more than 3 billion social media users accounting for 49 % of the world's population. In India, the number of social media users stands more than 376 million with a population of more than 1.36 billion (Statista, 2020). The mental health impact of COVID-19 is not limited to affected persons, their families and the healthcare force but embraces society's response at large (Tandon, 2020). Amid the pandemic and subsequent nationwide lockdown, there has been a surge in social media usage which is also reflective of a social response worldwide. For instance, in India 87 % people reported increase in its usage with 75 % spending increasing amount of time on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp (Business Today, March 30, 2020). Given the backdrop of this alarming data, it is pertinent to debate two questions i.e. (a) “Does the current pattern of social media usage suggest a trend towards addictive behavior or has it become a coping mechanism to deal with current global crisis?” and (b) “What are the current and future implications of this trend on addictive behavior and mental health of people?”.

Considering its widespread use across ages, social media is known to be a source of social reinforcement and validation. This platform provide people with an opportunity to share ideas, interact socially, form relationships, draw attention of others and create social image (Kietzmann et al., 2011). During the current global crises when ‘social distancing’ has become a norm, over-engagement in social media has become a ‘psychological necessity’ thereby helping people to address their needs of human interaction and coping with the pandemic. Therefore, despite the precautionary guidelines of social distancing, it provides people a platform to remain socially connected and universalize distress caused by the current crisis. Apart from socialization, social media is also being used for academic and work-related purposes like conducting online lectures, webinars, meetings and ensuring work from home. One of the major advantages of social media is that it facilitates awareness and provides mental health support by making resources available to those facing distress caused by lockdown and to those who are isolated as a result of being quarantined. With the help of this platform, data scientists and healthcare professionals have recently surfaced as social media influencers with the aim to mobilize people for taking proactive steps to deal with the crisis (The Economic Times, 2020).

In the ongoing scenario, social media has become one of the major sources for updating information on COVID-19 for people. However, its irresponsible use poses the challenge of ‘infodemics’ i.e. a situation when ‘misinformation’ spreads rapidly thereby affecting thinking and subsequent behavior of people. Recently WHO had cautioned people against social media rumors which lead to panic, stigma and irrational behavior (WHO, 2020). Given the rise in usage of this media, it becomes necessary to address its association with mental health. The

relationship between social media disorder and mental disorders becomes controversial which is attributable to diagnostic complications (Pantic, 2014). Research in the past has shown that compulsive usage of social media impacts physical and mental health including cardio-metabolic health, sleep, affect, self-esteem, well-being and functioning, especially in adolescents (Turel et al., 2016; Cheng and Li, 2014; Van Rooij and Schoenmakers, 2013). In light of the present pandemic, mental health conditions are found to be associated with the amount of social media exposure. For instance, a study during COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan China, found the prevalence of depression, anxiety and a combination of depression and anxiety (CDA) to be 48 %, 23 % and 19 % respectively. Moreover 82 % participants who were frequently exposed to social media reported high odds of anxiety as well as CDA (Gao et al., 2020).

It is well known to us and also resonated by research that ‘internet addiction’ is predominantly linked to increased social media or gaming activities (Van Rooij and Schoenmakers, 2013; Van Rooij and Prause, 2014). While DSM-5 (APA, 2013) and the stable version of ICD-11 (WHO, 2018) have identified ‘Internet gaming disorder’ (IGD) as a provisional disorder, social media disorder is still not acknowledged. Increasing research is advocating that social media disorder should be considered an addictive disorder just like IGD (Pantic, 2014; Ryan et al., 2014). According to the DSM-5, a person is diagnosed as having IGD if there is fulfillment of 5 (or more) of the 9 criteria (preoccupation, tolerance, withdrawal, persistence, escape, problems, deception, displacement, and conflict) during a period of 12 months. Since social-media disorder and IGD both relate to internet use, researches refer to nine IGD criterion of DSM-5 for constructing diagnostic tools and establishing internet / social media addiction (Regina et al., 2016; Van den Eijnden, 2016). Since COVID-19 outbreak began from end of 2019 and crossed international borders from the beginning of 2020, undeniably ‘12 months DSM 5 criterion’ is not applicable. But it is difficult to say if five or more IGD DSM-5 criteria are fulfilled by the excessive social media users.

It comes with a word of caution that excessive social media usage is known to be highly addictive due to its psychological, social and neurobiological basis. During current pandemic, like many other uncertainties, it is unclear whether this compulsive use of social media is just a ‘phase’ and a coping mechanism or an indication of addictive behavior having mental health implications. Hence, in terms of current research implications and management, it is imperative to keep the contextual issue of global pandemic in mind and differentiate between addictive and extremely involved behavior. It can be explored whether (apart from the criterion of 12 month duration) people fulfill at least 5 out of 9 IGD criterion of DSM-5. Here it would be worthwhile to add that because of unique sociocultural context, experience of various Asian countries during COVID -19 pandemic needs to be studied and shared with the world (Tandon, 2020). Moreover, any research

conducted on addictive behaviors in the current time should consider longitudinally the pre-present-post lockdown social media usage pattern and its mental health implications among individuals across all age groups.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Mental health professionals serving selflessly during current global pandemic.

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